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John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

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→ Fall 1997 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize

We are pleased to invite applications for the Fall 1997 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize. This prize of \$350 will be awarded to the teacher submitting the best sequence of writing assignments for a Freshman Writing Seminar.

Assignment sequences in a writing course are built around a series of essay topics (probably for a portion of the course). Submissions should include a rationale and a description of your plans for eliciting and responding to student drafts and revisions, as well as a description of how you ready students for each essay assignment, for example by engaging them in preparatory writing exercises, including informal writing designed to help students understand the material on which they subsequently write formal essays. Reflections on what worked well, and why, and what you would change another time, are welcome.

Submissions are due in 159 Goldwin Smith by **Friday, December 19**. No exceptions can be made. The winner will be announced to the Cornell community, and copies of the winning assignment sequence will be made available to all interested staff.

→ Fall 1997 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize Application

Instructor's name Peter Vail

Department Anthropology

Course title Sports and Culture

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Writing Program permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of my essay, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize.

That's Not Cricket!

title of assignment sequence

Instructor's signature

Date

Peter Vail

12/18/97

Anthropology 152: Sports and Culture
Submission for Sequence Award

That's not Cricket!

My submission for the sequence award is a set of three short essays I assigned midway through the semester. The exercise was quite successful, in my opinion, although I will recommend small modifications for anyone interested in reproducing the assignment. The sequence can be adapted to any subject matter, but I will provide details of the material I used to properly contextualize the exercise. Because it was in the middle of the semester, there were many preparatory exercises leading up to it, some of which directly addressed the assignment, and some less directly. I will account for those in a preparation section below.

Abstract

The gist of the exercise was to write three essays on the same data for three widely disparate audiences. The "data" was the game of cricket, as played not only in Great Britain, but in the Trobriand Islands.

Preparation

The first (and for the students, the most appealing) preparation was learning how to play cricket on the Ag Quad. Guest instructor (and cricket enthusiast) Nick Fowler gave the day's lesson, teaching students not only the rules of the game, but proper etiquette and demeanor as well. After the game, students retired to the "clubhouse" for cucumber sandwiches, courtesy of Jacqueline Hatton. The rules of etiquette and the ceremonial sharing of food were crucial anthropological lessons because they offered understandable comparisons to the next form of the game students studied: Trobriand Cricket. Trobriand Cricket, a well known ethnographic film from the early 1970s, shows how Trobriand Islanders appropriated the game of cricket and reinvested it with their own cultural meanings. The film informed students about British colonialism, the nature of "masculine" culture in sports, and the ritual

importance of the game and associated activities-- exchange of food, village solidarity, male prowess, etc. Students also read several pertinent articles on related themes. They read of Indian/ Pakistani cricket and the formation of national identity, comparisons of American and Japanese baseball, amongst others. A bibliography of the pertinent readings is appended. Thus the students were well equipped ethnographically to talk meaningfully about the different permutations of cricket they had encountered.

Different writing assignments helped prepare students for this exercise. One in particular was valuable, in which students took simple sentences or phrases and, in groups, rewrote them *into* Lanham's "Official Style". That is, students had to create the most officious, bombastic prose they could muster, the lesson being (as one student succinctly put it) "writing this way makes you feel like you're trying to be important". This was their first introduction to *ethos* or "voice".

The Exercise

Here are the three essays students were asked to write:

Essay Assignment (1)

Imagine you are a British colonial official, passed over for the cushy job you wanted in the London office and sent instead to the remote and mosquito-ridden Trobriand Islands. Write a 2-3 page paper explaining to your friends on your home cricket team how the Trobriand Islanders have perverted the game of cricket.

Essay Assignment (2)

Just as you, the British colonial official, are finishing up your letter to your cricket buddies back in the home country, a group of angry Trobrianders storm into your hut. Having peeked through the cracks in the bamboo walls, they've seen your letter, and they are outraged. They begin dropping ominous hints about having you over 'for dinner'. Calm them down, and explain to the Trobriand Islanders how they have improved the game of cricket. You have 2-3 pages to live.

Essay Assignment (3)

Having survived your brush with death in the hands of angry Trobrianders, you get selected as a candidate for the Royal Academy of Science for your brilliant ethnographical work among the natives. Of course, the Royal Academy demands a

writing sample. In 2-3 pages, account for the cultural variations in the game of cricket you've witnessed.

Goals / Justification

The first essay is clearly intended to be informal, and gives students an opportunity to brainstorm material for the subsequent essays. The second foregrounds persuasion-- obvious and desperate persuasion-- and most students mustered a respectable degree of conciliation, poise, and quick thinking. The third moves them to formal academic writing, the goal of the course. The key to the exercise lies in the movement from one essay to the next, and it addresses several valuable issues.

Audience

In the beginning of the semester, students had trouble envisioning the audience for whom they were writing, a problem largely attributable to the high school writing environment. In high school, they wrote essays for their teachers, mostly in English classes. A broader sense of audience was never discussed, and students saw essay writing as an exercise in which they wrote what they thought the teacher wanted them to "think" or "feel" about a given book or poem. Their papers typically started with an overly-general introduction, presented some facts or quotes from the text, and then moved on to the "I feel this poem..." pseudo-personalized conclusion. Students could not address audiences aside from the student-teacher dyad. This exercise attempts to redress their myopic tendencies by forcing students to think about the nature of different audiences, about *ethos*, and the role of persuasion in writing. The essay questions may not be subtle (especially no. 2), but since it is the first time most are exposed to the idea of *ethos*, their "voice", it would be a mistake to make it anything but obvious.

Authentication

Incoming freshman have little "data" to write about, having been in college only a short time, and more than likely not being especially well read before getting here. Thus the writing instructor faces a quandary: how to balance "content" with "form"— obviously a student needs both. Thus students could benefit greatly by learning to authenticate their own experiences for use as "content", rather than resorting to first person accounts, or even weaker "I think that..." or "I feel that..." kinds of sentences. In essays 1 and 3, students practiced turning informal observations and opinions into formal academic prose.

Premises

Early in the semester we worked on syllogisms and enthymemes, learning how to construct valid arguments, and how to distill a writer's (often unwritten) premises. Students were often surprised to discover how much they disagreed with the implied premises of an article, and even more surprised that they had not even noticed them. The second essay of this assignment, in which they must defend Trobriand cricket in Trobriand terms, allowed students to take this one step further. Rather than just identify the major premise of an article, they had to try writing from someone else's premises-- ones with which they patently disagreed (magic, nature of competition, etc.). Everyone argues this way in non-academic contexts, often unconsciously; this exercise made students aware of the process and how it applies to writing. It also forced students to anticipate counter-arguments in their writing.

Level of Diction

Each essay required a different level of diction and formality, from first person in the first essay, second person in the second, and third in the third. The emphasis throughout the course was third person, but students often lapsed into first and second person. This assignment attempted to redress that by having students rework similar arguments into different levels of diction. Consistency was the key, and the lesson stuck for most of the students.

Criticisms

Before I used this exercise, I submitted it to several people for comments. The chief criticism was an anthropological one: the second essay in particular may reinforce stereotyped notions of Trobrianders as primitive and violent. The criticism is fair. I chose to go ahead with the assignment unaltered however, because I felt that the entertainment value of the question would elicit better responses than a watered-down version. Also, I felt the question needed the immediacy of danger to get students to write from Trobriand, rather than their own, premises.

The first question drew a similar but less severe criticism. However, I felt justified in keeping that essay intact as well. I drew my inspiration for the assignment from Malinowski, (ironically, he worked in the same area) who expressed his revulsion for the islanders in his diaries, but his admiration in his academic work. The disparity

between the two accounts led to interesting class discussion on the nature of academic writing and personal experience.

I assigned the essays all at one time, so students could sort out the categories in which they were supposed to write. Since the sequence was contrastive in nature, I felt it wise to let students see the big picture before they wrote. I think a slightly different approach would have been more effective. Were I to do it again, I would have students brainstorm items for the first essay in groups, and have them compose the first essay in class. Only then would I give them the next 2 essay questions to write at home. I would lengthen the last essay considerably— 4-5 pages as opposed to 2-3, and I would require a rewrite of the third essay, since, in retrospect, I see it would have been perhaps the most useful essay for them to rewrite in the entire course.